

# Chinese Premier's visit opens the door to greater prosperity

The visit of Li Keqiang will raise the profile of Ireland on many levels, says Chinese Ambassador Jianguo Xu

**Jianguo Xu**

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Jianguo Xu

Today, the Taoiseach will welcome his counterpart, Chinese Premier Mr Li Keqiang, to his home county of Mayo. The two leaders will hold bilateral talks with over a dozen ministers and vice ministers from both countries in attendance.

This high-level engagement underlines the fact that China and Ireland are committed to working together in a mutually beneficial strategic partnership. I believe this partnership has the potential to create a serious economic dividend for both our nations.

The Chinese government is acutely conscious that Ireland has a very favourable business environment, as well as a young, well-educated workforce and a rapport with leading economic players. Numerous Irish and Chinese business leaders are already working to develop Ireland's importance as a key gateway for Chinese businesses and investors aspiring to expand into European and American markets. Right now, there is tremendous potential to create new and meaningful synergies between China and Ireland in trade, investment, education, culture, science, technology and other fields.

It is, however, crucially important that, working together, we raise Ireland's profile in China. I previously served for over three years as Chinese Ambassador to New Zealand. Upon my arrival in Dublin in March 2014, I found some strong similarities between Ireland and New Zealand. Both countries have similar landscapes, similar populations, similar industries, and both are English-speaking countries that share a long history with Britain. Both Ireland and New Zealand enjoy friendly diplomatic relations with China. Yet, there is a big disparity between Ireland and New Zealand in terms of their respective economic ties with China.

New Zealand has managed to elevate its economic ties with China, the world's most populous nation, to a much higher level than Ireland. Annual trade volume between China and New Zealand exceeds €13bn, which is double the volume in trade between China and Ireland.

Meanwhile, Chinese investment in New Zealand is over 11 times higher than Chinese investment in Ireland.

New Zealand's brilliant success in attracting Chinese investment and accessing Chinese markets can be largely attributed to its Free Trade Agreement with China, which was concluded in April 2008. But there is another important, often neglected, factor.

Each year, more than 200,000 Chinese citizens visit New Zealand as tourists, spending over €300m in total during their stay. New Zealanders have managed to make their country better known to millions of people in China, and this has underpinned trade and investment expansion. For many, many Chinese people, New Zealand ranks close to the top of their list for 'places I most want to visit.'

The incumbent New Zealand Prime Minister, John Key, has visited China four times since he took office in November 2008. He and his cabinet colleagues have created and taken opportunities to further enhance New Zealand's popularity with Chinese people.

Before I was appointed Chinese Ambassador to Ireland, I knew little about Ireland. I genuinely, but wrongly, thought that Ireland was much, much farther away from China than New Zealand. In fact, a direct flight from Beijing to Dublin/Shannon would be marginally shorter than any flight from a Chinese city to New Zealand.

Even today, few people in China would be able to name an Irish city, not even Dublin. Sadly and frustratingly, few Chinese consumers have ever heard of Ireland as a food-producer and exporter, few know that Ireland breeds the fastest racing horses in the entire world and produces the best quality infant formula milk powder and triple-distilled whiskey, which are just a few remarkable selling points about this fantastic island.

As Chinese Ambassador to Ireland, I want to help develop Chinese people's knowledge of Ireland. This will inevitably help Ireland benefit more from China's rapid economic growth and development. I cannot think of a better way to increase a distant country's profile in China than by way of a visit by a top Chinese leader.

Premier Li's meeting with the Taoiseach is of particular significance for several reasons:

I Firstly, it has been 11 years since a Chinese head of government, known in China as 'Premier of the State Council', visited Ireland in May 2004;

I Secondly, it has been three years since the Taoiseach met with the Premier's predecessor, Mr Wen Jiabao, in Beijing, and they reached a broad consensus on building a China-Ireland Strategic Partnership for Mutually Beneficial Cooperation;

I Thirdly, it builds on the progress earlier this year when the Chinese government agreed to reopen the vast Chinese market to Irish beef, of which thousands of Irish farmers are rightly proud; and

I Fourthly, the Premier's 100-member delegation will include China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, National Development and Reform Commission Chairman Xu Shaoshi, Commerce Minister Gao Hucheng, and Agriculture Minister Han Changfu, which means that some of China's most senior politicians will be discussing with their Irish counterparts concrete measures to expand and strengthen economic ties.

One of the benefits of such a high-profile visit is that it presents a rare opportunity for this peaceful and beautiful island to be widely reported on by Chinese news media. The coverage of the Premier's trip will reach several hundred million Chinese people not only in China, but also in other parts of the world.

In recent years, Chinese-Irish relations have grown exponentially and this weekend offers a truly golden opportunity to further deepen co-operation.

Jianguo Xu is Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the People's Republic of China to Ireland. He previously served as China's Ambassador to Georgia, Nigeria and New Zealand.

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